

Former Skip-A-Long student snags scholarship

By Jessica Fink, jfink@qconline.com

Skip-A-Long Child Development Center alumnus Brittani Blair, 18, knew a career in elementary education was for her ever since her own grade school days when she was inspired by the compassionate and caring nature of her second grade teacher.

Today Ms. Blair will receive a \$750 scholarship from her former stomping grounds to put toward her educational ambitions. Named after Virgie Wells, a former Skip-A-Long teacher and higher education advocate who worked at the center for 30 years, the scholarship is awarded annually to a former Skip-A-Long student.

“Virgie loved children with all her heart and treated each one as if they were her own,” said Laurie Walker, executive director of Skip-A-Long Child Development Center. “She was just one of those teachers who would always go the extra mile for her kids.”

Ms. Blair's mother, Lisa, said her daughter possesses the same qualities.

“Brittani's a very patient, understanding and helpful person around children,” she said. “She's always liked kids and watching them grow. A child's earliest years are the most important as far as learning goes. Teaching will be a very rewarding career for her.”

Ms. Blair attended Skip-A-Long's Moline campus from 1992 to 1998. A recent United Township High School graduate, she will attend Black Hawk College for two years this fall and later transfer to Western Illinois University to major in elementary education.

“Probably one of the things that gave her an edge over the rest is that she's choosing to major in elementary education,” Ms. Walker said. “We need to reward and encourage those people who choose that as a career. It's not an easy field.”

During her senior year of high school, Ms. Blair worked for a semester at George O. Barr Elementary School as a teacher's assistant alongside her former second grade teacher, Linda Minas.

“I worked there a couple hours a week through the high school and got a good taste of what teaching's going to be like,” said Ms. Blair, who hopes to one day teach second grade.

The Silvis native currently teaches gymnastics and tumbling at the YMCA and also volunteers at the Mississippi Valley Regional Blood Center.

“She's done a lot of community and volunteer work,” Ms. Blair's mother said. “Those things take time, and a lot of kids don't understand the value in it. It's kind of rare these days to see someone her age so involved.”

Receiving the scholarship was an honor, Ms. Blair said.

“I think it's important to invest in our young people – we're helping to develop our future workforce,” Ms. Walker said. “Teaching is a difficult and stressful field and doesn't pay much. So you really need people who are in it for the right reasons.”

Established in 2004, the scholarship is open to any graduating senior who attended Skip-A-Long and plans to enter an accredited college. Candidates are required to submit an application and essay stating why they deserved the scholarship.

“There were a lot of qualified applicants, but Brittani just won the hearts over of everyone,” Ms. Walker said.